DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 798 SP 037 962

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TITLE	Look Away: How a High School is Reflected in a Child.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1998-04-17
NOTE	35p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Diego, CA, April 13-17, 1998).
CONTRACT	R306F60079
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; *Educational Environment; *High School Students; High Schools; Hispanic Americans; Minority Group Children; Parent Attitudes; *School Culture; Student Attitudes; Student Behavior; *Student School Relationship; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Expectations of Students
IDENTIFIERS	Hispanic American Students; New York City Board of Education

ABSTRACT

This paper examines, through the eyes of Benjamin, a troubled Hispanic high school student in the Bronx, how the character of the school is reflected in the way that it flows around, or evades, its more troubled students. The paper discusses a relatively new school's attempt to understand itself and to define its point of intersection in the life of a child whose values are incompatible with its own. The study began by looking for the processes by which teachers, families, and students with different traditions, values, beliefs, and experiences gain a greater mutual understanding. Observations of and interviews with the student's parents, with teachers at the school, and with the student himself over the year and in various classes provided data for the study. The observations point out the significant mismatch between the student's own aims and those of the high school. Data from the observations showed that knowing the student was part of helping him to be successful, and the school was not a place where a student could hide and still succeed. The school recognized that blurring of the boundaries between the student's life inside and outside of school made for a more powerful form of schooling, though the student felt the effect was too powerful. The school is still searching for ways to bring in students like Benjamin who have behavior problems that jeopardize their success. (SM)

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ED 419 798

LOOK AWAY: How a High School is Reflected in a Child

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for presentation at the
American Educational Research Association Convention
San Diego CA April 17 1998
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LOOK AWAY: How a High School is Reflected in a Child[1]

This is a story of a boy. But it is not really about the boy. It is really a story of a school, and how the character of the school is reflected in the way that it flows around, or evades, one of its more troubled students. It is about a relatively new school's attempt to understand itself, and to define its point of intersection in the life of a child whose values are so incompatible with its own.

I enter this story as a researcher in search of *cultural interchange* in a Bronx high school. I and a team of three other researchers spent some months unpeeling the concept of cultural interchange, trying to come to some understanding of what such a thing would look like in a school or a classroom. No one of us, of course, ever arrived at quite the same interpretation as any other, and what we have seen on our respective sites has further refined our separate understandings of it. Nonetheless, we did begin with a general notion that what we were looking for is "the processes by which teachers, families, and students with different traditions, values, beliefs and experiences gain a greater mutual understanding."[2]

What I believed I would find in the way of cultural interchange at the school I studied centered around the school's creation of an intellectual culture -- that is, how it taught its students the nature of learning, what learning looked like, the ways it made your life, your patterns of thinking,

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[1]This study is supported by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement Field-Initiated Grant #R306F60079. This report represents the views of its author, and not necessarily those of the OERI.

[2]Proposal, *Cultural Interchange in Four Urban School Communities*, 1997.

change. I wanted to see how building such a culture affected children's attitudes about knowledge, and about themselves. I also wanted to see if what it learned from children in the process would change the school itself.

It is never acceptable, I have always believed, to leave a situation exactly as you entered it. Every experience is an opportunity to encounter disequilibrium, to "get knocked out of your space" in a way that helps you to see the world as you have not seen it theretofore. This, I feel, is just what schools should do to children. When I think about the work of schools, I find myself continually returning to such terms as *disequilibrium, shake up, make your brain hurt,*[3] and my favorite, *disturb.*[4] Schools should *disturb* children. Schools should never be content to tiptoe around children's assumptions and ideas. Schools should not be afraid to make children's brains "hurt."

What I am *not* speaking of is the form of cultural vandalism in which adults behave as if children, particularly those from "deprived backgrounds," bring little to school worth preserving; that what they enter with must be thrown aside in favor of something "better," much as one exchanges a filthy garment for a clean one. There is nothing in such an approach that whets a child's appetite to learn, to engage more deeply with her own ideas and the ideas of others. Such attitudes, more likely than not, foster resentment and a blanket rejection of anything the school might have to offer (Fine, 1991; Kohl, 1994).

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[3]I borrow this phrase from a student I observed in a particularly charged humanities class discussion one afternoon. Her persuasively-argued points had been gently demolished by the questions the teacher posed in response. At the end of the class period, no arguments left, I heard her say aloud, "My brain hurts."

[4]The definitions of "disturb" that most closely approximate my meaning are "to trouble or upset the tranquillity of," "to disarrange" (from *Webster's II New Riverside Dictionary,* Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1984).

What I *am* speaking of is an atmosphere in which children and adults perpetually challenge each other to readjust the lenses that they hold up to the world; one in which disequilibrium is sought rather than avoided. One in which questions are not *always* things to be answered as quickly and painlessly as possible by the person who "knows the most," but rather are springboards into the unexplored terrain of unfamiliar ideas, or points of reentry into familiar ones that bear fresh investigation. An atmosphere in which answers are not always hard-formed things, like cooled lava, but things that grow, change, and respond to new insight and information. An atmosphere where teachers and students learn not to be afraid of encountering notions that may upend the ones they already have.

ON BENJAMIN'S SCHOOL

I went into this Bronx high school because I believed it would be a *disturbing* place. I had met the director, Audrey Hogan, some years before when a crop of new alternative schools was starting in New York City. In my role of documenting the birth of some of these schools, I encountered Ms. Hogan and the school she started, Central Bronx Academy (CBA)[5] . Now I recalled the painstaking care with which she had assembled her staff. I remembered the kinds of questions she asked the teachers she interviewed. I remembered hearing her talk about the kinds of things she wanted to see those teachers bring to the children they would serve. I spent time in her school that first year sitting in on classes, meetings, and talking to teachers

[5]The name of the school, its director, teachers, and students, as well as most other identifying details, have been changed.

and students; I saw the things Ms. Hogan and the teachers asked those students to do. And from what a number of those students told me, CBA was a place where a lot of kids' brains hurt.

CBA, a relatively small high school (just under 400 students) in a predominantly Latino section of the Bronx, New York, is located in a building that also houses three other alternative high schools. It has a mostly young (a good number of the teachers are in their late 20's to early 30's), multiracial staff of about twenty teachers. CBA's student population is about two thirds Latino and one third children of African descent. There are no White students at CBA.

Ms. Hogan, a young African American woman in her early 30's, has a clear, unequivocal vision of CBA's mission to its students and community. She began her teaching career as a science teacher in a large comprehensive high school -- a place that showed her, as she related to me in so many words, what she did *not* want her school to be.

> It seemed as if people accepted the fact that kids were going to misbehave and didn't demand any better of them, which was frustrating. Not everybody, but there was a general tone that some inappropriate behavior was acceptable...There was a bit of emphasis on sports. And I love sports, but one of the years I was there, the football team and the basketball team won their championships in their leagues, and every time I looked, the principal was over the intercom, announcing these kids' names. And I said, we have some kids here who are going to college and getting scholarships -- you're not announcing *their* names over the intercom. Obviously, we're sending the wrong message...stressing football and basketball as the thing that's important seemed a little warped to me...
>
> I found myself blaming the kids. I'd go into the teachers' cafeteria, and everybody would be complaining about how horrible the kids were, and I'd be there with them. And finally I had to snap out of it and realize that was not the way to go. So I ended up eating in my room by myself, and trying to reassess what exactly the issues were, and realizing it wasn't the kids, it was me, it was the teachers, it was what we were demanding of them. But I didn't know what to do. All I knew was that this wasn't right. It just wasn't right.[6]

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[6]Interview with the author, 1.23.95.

Ms. Hogan's burden, by the assessment of the teachers that I spoke to in my study, as well as by her own, is for rigorous academics. CBA does not use the credit-based system common in more traditionally-structured high schools. Rather students are required to assemble and defend portfolios, and are provided in advance with the guidelines against which their work, as well as their defense of it, will be measured. Every weekend there is Saturday School, where students can come in for extra help from teachers -- an option that, Ms. Hogan encourages the teachers to let kids know, is not really "optional." The distinct message that success in academics is "what really matters" at CBA is not lost on its students. Several times I have witnessed the "crush" to complete and prepare to defend portfolios at the end of each grading period; the tension is palpable. In the words of Leo, an 11th grader:

> Once March comes, *boom!* Everybody's on their toes. Everybody's like, "Portfolios are coming, oh, I have to get this project done," -- after school, Saturday school -- "basketball practice, whatever practice, I'm cutting it."...They do a lotta things like that. After school, Saturday school, they come over teachers' houses -- they're constantly working; constant, constant. They know once that portfolio time comes, you just gotta be tight...
>
> Portfolios make my head hurt...when portfolio time comes, you can't be like, "Uhm...uhm" -- you gotta know your stuff, you know?...They give you questions about your work -- see if you really know, see if you were really paying attention. They like to hear details...
>
> At portfolio time, you can't get any computers. *Can't get any computers!* Saturday school is jam-packed like it's a regular day! People are typing in the office, ask people to type for you while you get up. Usually I could get up and leave my computer, walk around the room. You get up, [people ask you], "You gonna use this, you gonna use this?" That's a stressful time. You see people throwing their papers, going wild; it's wild, all the time.

Getting students to the point where they viewed school as "real work," where they felt accountable for what they produced, and knew that the adults around them held them to that accountability, was an evident aim of CBA. When I mentioned to Ms. Hogan how some students had made reference to their heads "hurting," she responded:

> I think you're asking me what the purpose of school is...And the reality of life is that it makes your head hurt. So we want to do things with kids to get them ready for that.

Ms. Hogan demonstrates a firm belief that the primary objective of high school should be to prepare youth to make intelligent choices, as well as to equip them for real options in life. She does not believe that all high schools do this; that in fact, some high schools appear to have more of an interest in keeping kids busy, entertained, or out of trouble. For CBA, this is hardly a worthy objective. Ms. Hogan has said that she sees the role of this school as helping to make children "powerful:" "I want kids to be powerful," she once said. "In my mind, everything that we're trying to do here is helping them work towards that."

Ms. Hogan is fearless about placing high demands on her school, and has few qualms about pushing students, as well as teachers, to attempt things they may assume impossible.

> The biggest thing I've learned from the kids is that the things I've believed intellectually -- that all students can learn -- I know is true, as opposed to just rhetoric. And I know that if we push them far enough, they can pretty much reach anything we want them to.

When I ask her what has shown her this, she says:

> Just the way they've been able to respond to a lot of what we've asked of them. We ask them basically to do things that many of them have never thought about doing before, [such as] think about going to college. Think of themselves as intellectuals. Just opening themselves to different kinds of things that they may not want to do normally. Just imagine all kinds of new possibilities that they never imagined themselves.

From what I have seen, CBA's focus is, indeed, heavily oriented toward academics, and very lightly toward such "non-academic" pursuits as sports. This is not because Ms. Hogan and her staff deny the importance of sports to a well-rounded curriculum. Yet central office dictates, as well as limited resources and the hard choices that necessarily attend such limitations, has

forced certain constraints on CBA's extracurricular offerings -- but never at the expense of what it views as most important: placing rigorous academic demands on children who have rarely been subjected to them.[7]

Yet there is still the dilemma that these "extras" can provide hooks for less academically-engaged children. As one teacher put it:

> We should also provide a rich enough social and recreational atmosphere to kids that they want to be part of our school, even if their focus isn't immediately academic. And we don't do that. We're political captives on things like sports teams, and we're resource poor. As a teacher, my mission should be the academic component. But our whole school should not be just about that. [Ms. Hogan] is a very academically-minded person, but kids are not just academic beings, and the school should try to serve the whole kid. The center and the main thrust should be academics, and we should use this recreational/social life to hook them into doing some academics. -- Mr. McFadden, math/science teacher

I began my observations for this project in late October of 1996 (Ms. Hogan had asked me to delay starting my study until a some of the beginning-of-the-year confusion had settled down, and things were running a little more smoothly). I focused my observation on one house[8] in Division One -- House I, which was composed of 9th and 10th graders, and had about 45 students. For some months there I observed classes, chatted with students, visited the lunchroom, and talked to teachers before I began to zoom in on a few children. I planned to select four students that would help to illuminate

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[7]CBA *has* run intramural sports teams in the past (basketball, football, for instance) in which they played against other schools within the building. Recently, however, the Board of Education stipulated that instead of each school having its own teams, there would be teams in each sport open to all schools in the building. CBA students are free to join these activities, though they are not directly CBA-sponsored. There are CBA-sponsored after-school programs, however, such as the HIV peer counseling team, a conflict resolution team, and student council. Yet students who expect the dizzying array of activities existing in more traditional high schools, however, sometimes complain about the lack of clubs and sports.

[8]The school is organized into two divisions -- Division One, which is 9th and 10th grades; and Division Two, which comprises 11th grade and the Senior Institute (12th grade). There are 4 houses at the Division One level -- Houses I, II, III and IV -- and Division Two is a single house, sometimes referred to as House V.

CBA for me -- four (I hoped) very different children, that would have very different things to say. I believed that the lenses their disparate experiences would train on the school would be illuminating.

BENJAMIN AT SCHOOL

I waited a few months before I asked any kids to be in my study. Benjamin was the first one I asked.

A not-particularly tall, though well-built Puerto Rican boy with a gaze that alternated between a mischievous squint and an inscrutable stare, Benjamin really came to my attention a week or so after I began my observations, though I'm not certain precisely what it was about him that struck me. It may have been the eyebrows: he had shaved stylish little notches -- one, two -- in each eyebrow, as many of the young boys were doing at the time. Or that he came to class in an undershirt, which struck me as incredibly nervy. Or that even seated, he was constantly in motion -- miming, gagging, singing. At the time I was still trying to familiarize myself with the new kids, as well as to refamiliarize myself with the ones I had met in the school's first year. (My notes from the earliest months of this observation are peppered with such jottings as *"Jessy: curly hair, wore black shirt, jeans; peeked over my shoulder at my computer screen"*). After class, I asked the humanities teacher, Hoshi Sullivan, about him. Ms. Sullivan filled me in on a number of kids who had caught my eye. I was not at that time necessarily thinking of making them part of my study; I just wanted to know who they all were. Of Benjamin, I jotted down from my discussion with Ms. Sullivan and my own observations:

(11.7.96) Benjamin: Shaved eyebrows; was wearing undershirt in class. 18 years old; has been in school no more than 12-15 days all year, Ms. Sullivan tells me. Today is his second time in Ms S's class. May need to be placed into a GED program. No learning difficulties apparent, but has little interest in school.

Benjamin did not appear to be in class often that first year; even less the second. When he was there, however, his behavior provided a curious antiphony to that of the of the other children. I noticed how events of the class seemed to course around him, how he never seemed an integral part of what was going on. Even early on, his often curious behavior (breaking into song while students were working silently, making faces, imitating the noise of a machine gun) hardly interrupted the flow of the class at all. For the most part, it seemed as if the other kids had already taken his measure, and had deemed him not worth following. Benjamin was not one who could bring down a class.

When he was in my class, he was not a problem. If anything, he let what needed to happen happen...Benjamin didn't mess with other kids, he didn't mess with me. Sometimes he would break out in song, and I would have to remind him. But that wasn't *too* much of a distraction. That didn't bother me. And also, he didn't really demand tons of my attention, either. -- Mr. McFadden, math/science teacher

Indeed, from what I observed in Mr. McFadden's class, Benjamin's usual place there was on the periphery:

At Mr. McF's desk, Benjamin is seated quietly, staring off. Kids who come up to, pass by the desk, do not speak to him, he does not speak to them. Mr. McF circulates around the room checking on other kids' work. Benjamin takes out a folded sheet of looseleaf paper from his pocket, reads it.

He sits with chin down on his folded arms; seems tired, out of it. (I notice that he seems to function during the Do Now[9], but when the class gets into the deep work, he slides off to the side; does not have anything to contribute. He has no bridge that he's working on, as far as I can see [class has been working in small groups to build miniature bridges in their study of force, tension, compression and other physical concepts]. At one point leans back in his seat, pseudo-screams "I hate myself!" (though from the way

[9]"Do Now" is a 10-15" period at the beginning of the class where teachers ask students to engage in a short problem or question as a warm-up task to the main activities of the day.

he does it, I get the impression he is imitating a sound clip from some song). Continues to fiddle, tapping his ruler on the desk, playing with the slip of paper that he has taken out of his pocket.

The other children seemed to find him mildly amusing, but had little intention of allowing him to distract them from what they had to do. He got the most attention from those who relished distractions of any kind.

Early that year I observed Benjamin in a humanities class. One of the themes for Division I then was the US Constitution and its creation. As part of this unit, the children were reviewing US geography -- an area which, as Ms. Sullivan explained to me, they were somewhat weak in. They had been assigned to color a map of the US, and were working in small groups, as they usually did.

(11.18.96) 1:30pm -- Benjamin is here again today; he seems to be working, and is ready to use the coloring pencils. Joins Boyce and Levina at their table.

1:39pm -- "California, the city of ..." Benjamin sings aloud; seatmates hiss for him to be quiet. He stops singing, but keeps up a running commentary as he works. Sophia, Levina are coloring, but Benjamin seems to focus most of his effort on entertaining them with his comments. He relates a story of when he was "locked up." Sophia asks him why he was locked up. "Armed robbery," he answers briefly before continuing his comments, which shortly trail off, about someone he knew in jail. Ms Sullivan mentions that they will be giving oral presentations on December 2, and that they need to start practicing for that. It seems that Benjamin doesn't have what he needs to complete this assignment though he's been coming every day, he says. Ms. S reminds him that he only started coming "every day" last week. She sends him to another humanities teacher to get an outline for the assignment. He returns some minutes later without the outline. "She won't listen to me, yo!" he complains; mutters something about punching her in the head. Ms. S assures him she'll get the paperwork for him.

1:58 -- Benjamin seems done with whatever work he's doing for the day. He is singing "Happy Birthday" in a sultry voice; ends with "Happy Birthday, Mr. Kennedy. I'm Marilyn Monroe." Class giggles. Ms. S tells them to put their work away, take out some paper for notes.

For some minutes, Benjamin has been bent over behind his desk in concentration; when he sits up, he has pierced the skin between some of his fingers with colored thumbtacks; flashes his hands to the class. "Allow me to demonstrate the skill of the Shaolin," he says. Ms. S tells Benjamin to put the tacks back in her desk.

Most of my classroom observations of Benjamin are somewhat like this early one. From the expectant glances he shot around the room during his "performances," it was clear how much he wanted to be seen. It occurred to me that there was some particular way he wanted his classmates to perceive him; and though he did "clownish" things, I did not get the feeling that he wanted to be taken for the class clown. He wanted to be looked up to, I guessed; to be viewed by his peers as "hard," worldly -- though there was a core vulnerability about him that belied the tough front he presented. (More than one of his teachers, interestingly enough, described him as "sweet.") He lied about his age -- told everyone he was 18 years old when he was really 15, something it took even the administration a little time to catch onto. In spite of all his efforts, though, it always seemed to me that Benjamin reckoned only marginally in his peers' consciousness -- that the space they took up in his head considerably exceeded what he took up in theirs.

There was for me a very small, but particularly telling, incident that illuminated the gulf that existed between how Benjamin seemed to want to be seen, and how he may, actually, have been seen. It involved another boy, Julius, who in the eyes of many CBA teens, was someone to look up to. Julius, a tall, heavyset African-Latino youth with a cool, rather remote demeanor and an authoritative swagger, was a leader. His speech, whether in the classroom or the cafeteria, was often surrounded by a respectful silence. His voice was not loud, and he actually seemed rather quiet. What struck me the most about him, I think, was how effortlessly he exuded the "cool" Benjamin worked so hard at. Unlike Benjamin, Julius rarely seemed concerned about his classmates' reactions to what he said or did; at times he seemed hardly to see them at all.

Early during the first year, I observed this short exchange between the two boys.

> Benjamin is seated at a desk near the center of the room, working quietly. Julius enters, walks over to Benjamin, and without warning, snatches the hat off Benjamin's head. Tells Benjamin, without rancor, just matter-of-factly, that the hat is his; proceeds to his locker at the back of the room. Benjamin looks stunned, a little alarmed, like he's afraid he won't get his hat back. For a moment he does nothing; it looks as if he's trying to gauge whether or not Julius is joking. Julius, as always, seems not particularly perturbed. (From his worried reaction, my guess is that the hat is Benjamin's.) Benjamin follows Julius to his locker at back of the room, asks Julius to look at the broken part in the back of the hat that marks it as his. After a minute or so, Julius relents, lets him have the hat. Moments later, Julius unearths his own hat from his locker, squashes it over his Afro, apologizes to Benjamin in that curt, abbreviated style of hip young males ("My bad, man," or something to that effect), and strolls back out the room. Benjamin is clearly relieved -- grateful, almost.

I thought about this little scene often when I struggled to understand the image Benjamin was attempting to craft for himself. What struck me most about it was that Benjamin, for all his bravado, was actually *afraid*. Something told me that he had no intention of going up against Julius for any reason, and that he was hoping, more than anything, that he could persuade Julius to surrender the hat of his own accord. I do not think that Benjamin feared for his physical safety, necessarily, but feared that against Julius' insistence, he did not stand a chance; that despite the fact that he, Benjamin, was right, and the hat *was* his, this meant little in the face of Julius' superior authority. It was authority like that, I thought, that Benjamin craved.

Around the end of April that first year was when I invited Benjamin to be in my study. He seemed surprised that I asked him, but readily agreed. Gave me his home number. Added that it might be good for him to have somebody "watching" him. Even as I asked him, I wasn't sure what Benjamin was going to teach me about CBA, let alone its attempt to craft an academically-oriented, intellectual culture -- particularly since it was already

clear that he spent more time out of class than in -- but I suspected that looking at the school through the lens of such a child would tell me a great deal about what CBA was struggling to be, or struggling not to be.

Listening to teachers describe him, I hoped, would offer clues about where the school saw itself, about what "page" it was on. Even before I'd decided to study Benjamin, I'd say to teachers, "Tell me about Benjamin." Scarce as he'd made himself, they all seemed to know something about him. One teacher said that she could tell, even from his odd bursts of singing in class, that he actually sang quite well, and perhaps the school could better engage him if it had an outlet for his singing talent. Another teacher mused:

> The funny thing is about Benjamin, I find him very endearing, even in the middle of his most inappropriate behaviors. There's something there...I can't explain. But there's something there that I feel needs and wants nurturing. Because when I just sit with him in a one-on-one situation, we have had some very interesting discussions. And he has knowledge that I really did not think he had.
>
> ...Sometimes the behavior seems just so inappropriate to the time and so -- *spontaneous*, that I don't even know if he's aware of what he's doing. Like leaping up and making believe he has a gun in his hand, you know. Why? What is this connected with?...It's like he sits there perfectly calmly, and then just gets up and starts shooting people with this make-believe Uzi.

Indeed, I saw a slightly different side of Benjamin when he worked with a teacher one-on-one. It was almost as if once he realized he didn't have to "perform;" that all that mattered was his ideas, not his image, he could allow those ideas to take center stage. Once I watched him in a class with Jacqueline Keye, who was one of the resource room teachers as well as his advisor.[10] After seeing that the six or so other kids in the classroom were

[10]Benjamin was not classified as a resource room student. There were a few occasions, however, when he would be put out of class for one reason or another, or would ask to leave. Sometimes he joined his advisor, Ms. Keye, in the resource room, where she would help him with his work.

settled down to some independent assignment, she sat down with him to review a humanities lesson he needed to complete work for.

(1.9.97) 9:54 -- Ms. Keye turns to Benjamin, gently reminds him that he has been out for a long time, and that he has no notebook, no supplies to work with. Tells him they will be beginning with study of the Black Panthers. Gets some supplies for him to work with from her desk.

JK: What do you know about the Black Panthers?

Benjamin: They wanted their freedom. They killed cops.

JK says she will write all this down: Why did they kill cops?

Benjamin says they should kill more of them.

JK tells him they want to have an intelligent discussion, and he will have to use his mind.

JK: Anything else?

Benjamin: They locked up Huey; he was the leader. And they did something to Washington.

JK: What do you call when people get together to express their ideas?

Benjamin: Boycott?

JK: Could be. They carry signs, saying they want equality.

Benjamin can't think of the word: Damn.

JK: Have you ever heard of the word "protest?"

Benjamin: Yeah. Like, don't kill animals. Fur.

JK: What was it like for Black people before the Black Panther party?

Benjamin: Real bad. They had segregated schools. They couldn't eat in the same place. (He thinks) It was bad. The Ku Klux Klan was there.

JK: What does the KKK do?

Benjamin: They wear white masks. They carry forks(?) sometimes. They tie people by ropes. They burn crosses. They carve signs on them with blades.

JK: It's true, they do all those things.

Benjamin: Skinheads, too.

JK: All those White supremacist groups have things in common. You're right, they burned and hung people.

Benjamin: Did they use guillotines?

JK explains what the guillotine was. Asks Benjamin: Why do you think the Panthers got together to write this program?

Benjamin: To see if the Blacks could be more equal with the Whites?

JK compliments his answer. He asks to go to the bathroom. She gives him a yellow Post-it as a pass. He leaves.

When Benjamin comes back, he reads through the Panthers selection. Nydia enters, pats him on the face in greeting; he tells her to get away. Another boy drifts in wearing a hooded sweatshirt. JK gets rid of him; closes the door. Goes to Benjamin, who tells her he is ready for her to see his work. He explains that Blacks were beaten by police, disrespected. JK asks him a few questions to elicit his understanding of "racism."

JK: Because of this, the Blacks decided to --

R: -- to stop all that. I forgot about that lady, Rosa Parks, that was in the bus --

JK: That was a little bit before that.

Further discussion on issues Panthers fought against.

JK interrupts herself to get a kid settled, to tell Brenna where to find construction paper. While JK attends to other students, other issues, it seems Benjamin is in constant motion. He pretends to be a baseball pitcher, winding up, making a pitch. Pretends he is driving a vehicle, really slow, until the girls near him start tittering.

When JK rejoins him, they discuss juries. She asks if he were being tried for a crime, who would he want on his jury -- Blacks, Whites, or Latinos? Benjamin says, "My family," then concedes that he would like "a mixture." JK says that one issue is that Blacks wanted more Black people in the juries. They talk further about issues of race in law enforcement. Benjamin takes advantage of some turn in the conversation to demonstrate how cops in Puerto Rico treat kids that are out after curfew, which sets the girls laughing again.

The Benjamin I saw there -- still "on stage," yet willing to offer his ideas and to engage with someone else's, was one that did not appear often. There was something about him that resisted getting too close, that shied away from putting forth himself, his thoughts, as if they were serious things, worthy of being dealt with. The Benjamin I saw more and more tended to strain toward the periphery, adamant about not becoming part of anything the school valued most. He worked hard to maintain an image ("fronting," as one teacher called the kinds of things he did), but never got too close.

Benjamin was not what one would call popular -- kids knew who he was, and greeted him when they saw him. His "hang buddies," however, were mostly students from another school -- as far as I could recognize, and from what he told me, only one other boy among his crew on the corner was from CBA.

The corner, in fact, was the one place I could usually count on seeing Benjamin. I wasn't seeing him in classes much, but failing to catch him there, I was sure to run into him eventually on the corner.

And the corners he picked to stand on were telling: either he stood on the one right where the school building sat, a few yards away from the fence, in fact -- a place that he might not be very visible to any teachers or the principal, unless one happened to step outside either the front or side doors. But his preferred spot, it seemed, was the stoop of a building directly across the street from the school. Later, as the weather grew colder, he donned a distinctive black and yellow jacket -- the yellow a noisy, irrepressible shade that made him impossible to miss if you looked from the windows of at least three different CBA classrooms. And it was clear that Benjamin wasn't trying to hide. He felt comfortable on that corner. When I asked him if the owners of the house minded that teenagers were congregating on the front step during school hours, he told me in the vague way I'd come to recognize that they didn't mind; they were his "friends."

The first time I saw him on the corner it surprised me. It surprised me that someone who was supposed to be inside a building not 10 yards away was so boldly flaunting his noncompliance. Why dared he stand so nearby? Wasn't the whole point not to be seen? I knew how CBA traditionally dealt with truants and cutters. I had seen, in the school's earliest days, how office

personnel would hit the phones religiously, calling parents any time their children failed to show up for school. For a moment I was afraid for him, afraid of the kind of trouble he would be in if the teachers caught him.

That first time I saw him, I asked him what he was doing there. He offered a somewhat foggy story of having had a problem the day before with a kid from one of the other schools in the building, and not wanting to go back in for now, because if he saw the boy he would have to fight him. He said he would go in tomorrow, after things had cooled down. I told him that tomorrow it would be too tempting to put off coming back for just one more day. He said no, no; really, tomorrow he would be there.

This conversation, it turned out, was much like others we would have in the future: I urging him to go back into the school, he insisting that no, he couldn't handle it right now, ("It's boring up there; I'm going crazy") but that he'd be there tomorrow, without fail. And as I saw him there, over and over again, it became clear that I wasn't the only one who saw him, and that his presence on that corner was no secret.

THE DUARTES

> ...When I was in school, really, it was much better than now. Because before we had more respect for parents. We went to school to learn. Not like now, these kids. They go to school, but they don't go to learn. We went to learn. And this thing about cutting classes, you didn't see that as much then, either. Although you didn't have many opportunities to go to school, you know...we walked to get to school. Sometimes there were kids who didn't have shoes. They came to school with holes in their clothes. We went because we knew there was a future for us.
>
> ...I tell Benjamin, you know, put a lot in your head -- study, study. Don't hang out with your friends and cut classes. But *mi hija*, I don't know. I don't understand, I don't understand. -- Mrs. Duarte, Benjamin's mother

I first met Benjamin's mother on a Sunday afternoon in mid-May, 1997, shortly after Benjamin had agreed to be part of my study. My notes from that visit:

> (5.15.97) As I approach 3A, two little girls are seated on the top step -- one about 10 or so, the other one about six, maybe. I look around for a second, and they ask me in very polite voices if they can help me. I ask them if they know the Duartes. The older girl says yes, and points me to a door. I ask her if she knows Benjamin. She grins; yes, she does. The smaller girl pipes up that she's Benjamin's niece. I ring the bell. Mrs. Duarte asks who it is, and I identify myself. She opens the door, asks me to wait a moment while she sequesters the dog. After locking her in a room to the side, Mrs. D escorts me to the living room. Her daughter, Alicia Elena, is with her, Benjamin's little sister. A smiling, pleasant faced girl of about 11 or 12. It turns out she is in 6th grade "going on 7th." Alicia Elena informs me that Benjamin's 16th birthday is coming up soon. She also tells me that she has narrowed down her career choices -- now she only has to decide among fashion designer, model, singer, and vet. And nurse, she adds later.
>
> Mrs. Duarte wonders if Benjamin has ADD. She had read about it somewhere, and it sounds exactly like his condition. No matter what he sits down to do, in a few moments he's up doing something else. I tell her it's hard to tell, and that when a kid gets a label, sometimes it's hard to live above it. I tell her that I've noticed too that he jumps from activity to activity.
>
> Benjamin is the apple of his father's eye, from Mrs. Duarte's description. She wonders if her husband spoils him. She says he gives him anything he wants. Alicia Elena says that her father makes her earn what she gets. Mrs. Duarte says that a kid should earn what he gets, not just get it for free. She wonders if that is why Benjamin is like he is.
>
> Mrs. Duarte says that she doesn't like CBA as much as Pride Academy, Benjamin's previous school[11]. At PA she said she got a call every time he was missing from school, but not so here. Benjamin was kicked out of PA for carrying a pocket knife (a "little knife" Mrs. Duarte calls it, holding out her hand to show the size; I gather it's about the size of a pocket knife.) She says Benjamin hates school. He feels he doesn't learn anything there. She is not certain what he wants to be when he grows up. She hears him talk about baseball a lot, and he only goes to school because she makes him.
>
> Mrs. Duarte says several times that she told Mr. Duarte to be there, but he did not get home. She tells me he's still in Manhattan.
>
> Mrs. Duarte says she hopes the study helps Benjamin, she doesn't know what to do with him. Right now he's hanging out someplace. A few minutes before I came she had seen him outside. He's supposed to be in at 9:00, 9:30, but he comes in very late (I don't ask her how late she means). I say it must be hard to get up in the morning if he goes to bed late, and she agrees. He hangs out after school.

[11] Benjamin had been expelled from another alternative school, Pride Academy (PA) on a weapons charge. He came to CBA around January of 1996.

I met Mr. Duarte when I visited the house on a later occasion, sometime in early June. I got the impression, though I am not sure quite how, that I had caught him there purely by accident, that he hadn't planned to be there at all when I arrived, though I'd made the appointment for a time that I could sit with both parents. As the three of us talked, however, Mr. Duarte warmed to the conversation and spoke with eloquence and passion about himself and his son.

> The difference before, when we went to school, that from the teacher, from the assistant principal, and the principal, and the counselors, they care. They care. And they don't hesitate, you know, to call your father. Now it's different...I have worked with different schools. But it's not the same. They don't focus on the students the way they did when we were in school. So what happens? If they don't focus on them, they get more freedom than they're supposed to get.

I ask Mr. Duarte if he feels that CBA, where Benjamin is now, is one of those schools that cares about students.

> He got his advisor, she's a good teacher, she speaks with us. Sometimes I tell her about problems with Benjie, and she says, "I'm going to speak with my superior to see if they can give him an evaluation, or something." Sometimes I think that he got problems; I don't know, *yo no se*. But then she says, "I'm going to call you," but she doesn't. If he cuts class, he's absent, they don't call here. If I call, I know. But if you didn't call, you wouldn't know. They don't send a paper, they don't say nothing.

At other times, Mr. Duarte expressed the view that the kind of education offered to kids like Benjamin was not really intended to advance the interests of a young, non-White male from the Bronx; that schools were more intent on containing children of color than empowering them. He felt that the schools offered a whitewashed view of America that someone like Benjamin could not connect with. For instance, Mr. Duarte talked to me about what he had learned about George Washington from reading, from watching the History Channel -- things he felt, that most schools were afraid to teach.

Because it's another thing, in the schools. They only teach the positive things of the American. See, you don't know that, that [George Washington] was in the English army, and he turned against them. They only teach in school the positive...They're gonna say in the school about George Washington that he got more than 1000 slaves, *tu entiendes?*[12]

More than once I asked Mr. Duarte if his remarks applied specifically to CBA, or was he speaking of American high schools in general? His responses stopped short of indicting CBA along with all the other schools (did he fear offending me, perhaps thinking me more closely affiliated with the school than I actually was? Or did he not fully trust the neutral stance I was trying so hard to maintain?). Yet it was clear that he thought CBA less than up to the task of engaging the mind of a son who, in his opinion, had "the capacity to teach in a school."

Mr. Duarte: I am talking with my heart. White teacher come all the way from, let's say, Yonkers, to teach -- she don't care! She doesn't know our son. He wanna learn, learn. And believe it, that's the truth...So, it's different that [Puerto Rico] -- our country, the teachers were the same race we were. And they focused on teaching.

KMG: What you're saying definitely is true in a lot of schools. Do you think it's true in this school, too, in Benjamin's school?

Mr. Duarte: I don't know in this school, but like [Mrs. Duarte] said, we're trying to make Benjamin have an evaluation for a long time, and they say yes, yes, but they never do.

---

[12]That he held this opinion was especially interesting to me. I thought particularly of the numerous classes I had observed with two of Benjamin's teachers: humanities teacher Hoshi Sullivan, a young African American woman in her late 20's who describes herself as a "nationalist;" and resource room teacher Jacqueline Keye, a White Jewish woman in her late 40's who openly embraces her working class, Socialist background. That their Black and Latino students get to hear "the other side," the side that often went unheard, had always seemed to me to be a driving objective behind the things these teachers chose to teach. As Ms. Sullivan once remarked, "I don't have any problem calling out the Framers [of the US Constitution] for who they were, and what they really were about...Not to bear disrespect, but to be clear about what's happening...[high school] kids are at an age where I can tell them the truth, and they can determine for themselves what that means to their personal life." (Interview with the author, 8.14.97) I did not know if Mr. Duarte had observed what I had observed, or on what, specifically, his opinion was based.

The Duartes clearly believed that CBA had fallen short of its obligation to Benjamin -- by not regularly informing them of his absences, by not having him tested (though Mrs. Duarte herself acknowledged the dilemma of saddling Benjamin with a label) and by not, finally, teaching in a way that made sense to him -- that is, like a "regular" high school, a "credit school." They had considered acceding to his demands to transfer to such a school.

> Mrs. Duarte: He always says he likes a school that has credits. "That school where I am, they don't give credits." I don't know.
>
> Mr. Duarte: That's another thing. He loves, let's say, talking about social studies --
>
> Mrs. Duarte: Like a regular school, you know, a regular high school --
>
> Mr. Duarte: -- you know, English language, classes. [At CBA] it's different...We do what he wants, because it's not what we want. He's the one who [says], "I don't want to go to that school, because I don't want to do nothing." He's speaking with the truth. And he's being realistic, he knows that he don't wanna do nothing... He told us many times that he wants to be in a school where credits are given. Like let's say they have Spanish, English, they have social studies, they got science, they got geometry, or they got biology -- that's what he wants.
>
> But maybe because his records are, you know, not good?...Maybe he's afraid that they're gonna say no in another school. But maybe if we tried, we can get another school for him. Because that's what he wants. Because it's not what we want, it's his life, his learning, and his future.

Mr. Duarte tells me that Benjamin was not always the kind of student he is now. Once upon a time he liked school, he says, and was a good student.

> I remember when he was in 5th grade, I worked in the school [that Benjamin attended at the time]. He wrote biographies for social studies. He was number one, believe me, he was number one. Focused. He wanted me to buy him magazines, you know. Now, he's only girls, girls, girls.

Girls, Mrs. Duarte adds, and *hangiando*.

ON BENJAMIN

About two more weeks passed before I managed to sit down with Benjamin himself for an interview. He had promised on at least one occasion before to be at the house when I came by, but by the time I arrived, he had disappeared.

Once, I had actually managed to track him down in the neighborhood. That occurred about 10 days after my initial visit with his family -- a visit from which he had been absent. On that particular day, I had stopped at the house to retrieve the appointment book I had forgotten there.

> Noela [translator who has accompanied me from a home visit earlier that evening] and I call Mrs. Duarte from the pay phone outside of the apartment building. She says she can let the book down to me in a bag. I wait under the window until it opens, and she lets down a plastic shopping bag tied to a really long length of plastic cord. My book is inside. I thank her, ask her for Benjamin; I haven't seen him. She tells me he was in school. (He probably wasn't; Ms. Sullivan told me today {Thursday} that she hasn't seen him since the beginning of the week. He had come in then, "acting like he was going to do work" -- asking her about things he'd missed, as if he seriously wanted to get them done. She hasn't seen him since. {And of course, last week with him hanging outside of the building and not going in because he was avoiding some kid who had been bothering him.} I don't push it any further -- a situation, I guess, where she sent him and he never got there).
>
> I ask Mrs. Duarte if she's seen Benjamin recently; she points off to her right, in the general direction of Longfellow Avenue. Since it's almost dark already, I decide not to pursue the matter, and Noela and I start back to the train station. On the corner, though, I see a young boy that I ask if he knows Benjamin. "He's Spanish?" the boy asks me. Yes, and has a little sister. "How many brothers? Two?" I think so, I tell him. The boy seems to know who I'm speaking of. "That's his brother right there." He points to some young men sitting around in a vacant lot. The brother's name is Stefán, the child says. I call through the gate to Stefán; he approaches me. I tell him who I am, that I'm doing a study with Benjamin, but I can't find him. Has he seen him? He tells me that Benjamin often hangs out on Longfellow; I could check there. I shake his hand through the fence, thank him. We head toward Longfellow, which is a short block away. At the corner I see a young Latina woman, ask her if she knows Benjamin Duarte. She says she doesn't know his last name, but she knows someone named Benjamin; he's right there. Points to a young man seated on the front step of a house across the street. He is alone, just staring down, seems to be napping.
>
> It's Benjamin. I'm unaccountably glad to see him -- I say hi, introduce him to Noela, ask him why I haven't seen him in school. He tells me it's boring there. I ask him about the boy he was avoiding at school -- a "punk-ass" from Franklin HS {another

school located in the same building as CBA]. I ask him how he handled it -- did he speak to one of the boy's teachers? (Though I know he would never do a thing like that.) He says no, "I keep it to myself." I ask him what he is going to do. He says he's going to get a job. The last job he had was passing out flyers -- he got fired when they caught him sending his cousin in his place. I tell him we're headed to the train station; would he mind walking us up there? (I don't think we need the escort, but it's a good excuse to chat with him a little). He agrees.

Along the way, he greets several people, and we talk. I ask him what other ideas he has for a job. He tells me he likes cars -- anything having to do with cars. Tells me he can put anything on, take anything off, can fix anything that's wrong with it. Says he likes painting cars, but that the paint "gets me mad high," though this seems more amusing than disturbing to him. Notes that the money is good, too. When I ask him what school Stefán goes to, he tells me that Stefán is 25. At some point, I ask him if he has a car. He says no, but he drives one. Stupidly, it doesn't occur to me to ask him whose car it is that he drives.

I remind Benjamin that portfolio time is coming up; what's he going to do? He tells me that he doesn't even have anything to put in his portfolio; about two pieces of work, maybe. If he gets left back, he says, he's dropping out for good. Maybe get a GED. I point out to him that a GED is for people who basically know the work, but for various reasons can't make it to school. If you don't even know the work, you can't pass the test. He smiles silently at this, doesn't answer.

I press him harder about what he's going to do. He doesn't know -- he says he'll find work with something he's good at. I tell him that it has to be not only something he's good at, but also something someone will pay him to do. He mentions he might go back to "PR[Puerto Rico]." His parents are thinking of sending him in July or August. Benjamin says it's better there. A few moments later he says it's "bad" there -- though I get the impression he means "bad" in a way that's OK with him. He says that people there will hurt you if you look at them funny. Tells me that he has a cousin there who's one of the most infamous "killers" on the island -- Mario Orejas. Tells me MO was wanted for murder, they hunted him for a long time. Finally caught him and locked him up. MO tried to break out, killed three guards in the process. They caught him again, and he's doing life.

What fascinates me most is Benjamin's demeanor as he relays this information -- excited, awed. "That's my *blood*," he says proudly at one point. Tells me his whole family in PR is "crazy" (points at his head.)

Before we part, he tells me he'll come back into school some time next week. I tell him that I'll be there on Tuesday. Can he be there then? He says he will. He'll just tell Mr. McFadden that he was in the hospital. I ask him if he really believes that Mr. McF will buy this. No answer to that; that smile again.

I didn't manage to connect with Benjamin the following Tuesday, and was unable to meet with him until nine days after that. This time I scheduled the appointment with him at the school, during his math/science class. The teacher, Mr. McFadden, had taken the students to the computer lab for the

afternoon. He had told me that I could borrow Benjamin for the class period, *please*, for Benjamin's sake as well as the class'. Suggested that the self-reflection might actually be more beneficial for him than anything he'd gain from a class he attended only sporadically.

After several minutes of waiting around the empty classroom it was obvious that Benjamin wasn't going to show. I knew that he had come to school that day; I had seen him in humanities class that morning. My notes:

> (5.29.97) I make an inquiry or two -- no one has seen Benjamin. I go over to the other side of the building to check the gym, see if he's still playing there. The gym is locked. I go back to the school's main office, ask if anyone there has seen him. Ms. Hadley [an office assistant] says she saw him outside around 11:00. I tell her I'll check if he's still there, and if he's not, I'm calling his mother.
>
> From a window, I can see a group of kids clustered on the corner across from the school, and surmise that he may be among them. I realize that I'll have to sneak up on him, not give him any time to run off. The usual door I come through is no good; he would see me walking up the block. I ask the security guard if I can get through another door, and I do.
>
> He is among the group of on the corner. His back is to me; the other kids in the group are facing me. They are sitting on a stoop of a house directly in front the school, near the corner. Benjamin appears to be entertaining them with a story -- he is jumping around, prancing, gesticulating. I call to him a couple times before he hears me. I ask him if he remembered our appointment. An exaggerated "Oh, NO!" type of reaction, covers his mouth, looks shocked. He tells me he had to leave for a lunch break; he was hungry (lunch was from 12:15 to 12:45; it is now well after 1pm). He is eating a sandwich; says he was going to come back after he'd finished it. He says he doesn't want to go into the building, doesn't want Mr. McFadden to see him. I tell him that Mr. McF is in the computer lab, not the classroom. Says he will come in, but that he can't stay. He's afraid that if the teachers see him, they will force him to stay.
>
> I manage to coax him into the building under great duress. When he sits down with me and the tape recorder, he is very fidgety, moves around a lot, looks at the two or three kids (they express shock at seeing him) who have stayed behind in the classroom. He explains to them that I have hired him to work with me. Looks around often, seems very conscious of the others in the room. Talks a little loud, and I get the impression that some of his more bombastic comments and gestures are as much for their benefit as mine. Benjamin slouches in his chair, looks away often. Maintains a good deal of bravado, but I can tell he's not totally comfortable, a little wary. He seems unable to stay focused -- he is most tuned into the conversation when it turns to the coins and baseball cards that he collects fanatically.

During the course of this interview, Benjamin tells me that the only reason he was in school that day was because it was "boring" at home. Adds that he had been in school the day before, but left to join some girls who were waiting for him outside. He finds it hard to stay in Mr. McFadden's class, he says, because Mr. McFadden is "always messin' with me, he always start with me."

KMG: What do you mean by "starting with" you?

BD: He pick on me. He always pick on me.

KMG: He asks you things, or --

BD: Nah, he's always talking -- nonsense.

KMG: Like what? Tell me.

BD: "Oh, why you don't do your work?" I be trying, I tell you, I'm trying...he's still, "*Aarrgh*, gotta do it, do it."

KMG: So that's picking on you?

BD: Yes.

KMG: Doesn't your mother do the same thing?

BD: My mother doesn't scream at me.

KMG: She doesn't scream at you?

BD: Oh, yeah, yeah -- but I expect it from her, but not from him.

KMG: Why don't you expect it from him?

BD: 'Cause I don't like people that's not from my family to start talking loud to me.

KMG: Oh, he was talking loud?

BD: Yeah.

KMG: So what, is it because he raises his voice at you, or because he asks you how come you're not here, how come you're not working --

BD: I don't know -- this class, it gets on my nerves. I dunno why, I'm just retarded, I dunno...

Although I do not say so to Benjamin, I recall that I have seen Mr. McFadden "having a talk" with him on one or two occasions. Though I wasn't able to hear what either of them said, I imagined, knowing Mr. McFadden, that these were intense, unequivocal communications that left Benjamin little room to hide behind the empty promises he made to himself and others. Mr. McFadden was always, if nothing else, clear. Benjamin, I was beginning to realize, treasured a vision of himself and his future that had little relation to his current reality. I suspected that Benjamin resented Mr. McFadden's irritating demands for accountability, resented how they forced him to confront the insubstantiality of that vision.

What also occurs to me then is that it is Mr. McFadden's "nagging" that has endeared him to so many of CBA's students -- his insistence that students treat schoolwork as *their* work, as seriously as they would a job; how adamant he was about "ideas getting the majority of the air time," as he put it, in the classroom. A number of students liked that he pushed them, that he expected a lot of them. In their view, it showed that he respected them. Benjamin did not seem to see it this way.

Though I had a number of impromptu encounters with him in the ensuing months, I did not sit down with Benjamin again for a formal taped interview until early the following school year, a little over two months after school had started. He had not, after all, transferred out of CBA -- though he had tried, and had given up in face of the effort it would take. He says that he is a bit more optimistic about succeeding at CBA, however, now that they may be offering more of the things that he likes:

...they puttin' us through more things; they giving us more programs, and stuff...Not like last year. Last year we hardly ever got gym. And I heard this year they gonna open up the pool. They gonna do mad stuff -- teams and junk. 'Cause I wanna be in the baseball team. I want a handball team.

This year, Benjamin tells me, will be different.

...now I'm going to class...you could ask the teachers. They saw me every day. They were surprised. They were like, "What you doin' here?" I was like, "Stayin' in school."

A little later I ask him, "If I come back two weeks from now, what will you tell me about school?"

Think I'm gonna tell you I been there every day, and was doing all my work. I'm not gonna get influenced by nobody else no more...I'm not gonna let nobody influence me on cutting. Like, that's why I leave, people be like, "C'mon, let's be out." So I be like *(mimes following them)*. But now, I'm stickin' onto my chair. Gotta do something.

I ask him to explain to me how he will manage to do this, especially since he has just said regarding his classes:

I be *bored* up in there. It's them classes, them classes got me dying already. They're too long. Mad long. Two hours, two-and-a-half -- oh my God, the same class?

But he assures me that he can make the turnaround; that indeed, he's done it before, and is certain he can do it again.

I could do it. I did it in 9th grade. Ninth grade I was, *ptth!* Forget it. Once it hit like February, when the new marking period started, every day, *brrr! (mimes intense activity)*, started getting higher than everybody in class.

When I ask Benjamin what he plans to do after graduation, he says:

First thing is get a job. Temple University sent me a thing to join their college. 'Cause I went out there, to Pennsylvania, with my counselor; he used to take us on college tours. And they sent me a booklet with the application, and they wrote, "We look forward to having you here, Benjamin." It's a good school...It's buttah![13] That's where I want to go. I don't wanna stay in New York. I wanna go far. Pennsylvania ain't that far, but at least it's not in New York. Get out of New York, another state.

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[13]"very good"

Get a new life? I ask him.

> Yeah, get a new life for four years, then come back. Have my money, have my phat[14] car...I wanna have it all.

ON BENJAMIN AND HIS SCHOOL

Benjamin's more flamboyant dreams -- "I want to be a Tony Montana...I wanna own the world," his idolization of his "cousin"[15] in Puerto Rico, or of being a "fed" like his older brother -- perhaps may be ascribed to an adolescent pursuit for an identity, an identity standing in stark contrast to his rather modest reality as a failing high school student whose classmates probably consider him less "cool" or tough than he'd like. Such fantasies are probably somewhat common among young people attempting for the first time to define a self image separate from that formed in the shadow of parents and family members. It is Benjamin's more mundane fictions, however -- that things will be completely different for him if he gets to go to a "credit" school; that "tomorrow" he will choose not to hang out with his friends on the corner, and will stay inside and go to class; that in spite of the academic choices he has made and continues to make, he will be accepted into, and succeed at, a competitive college; that being someplace other than New York will spell a new life --- that make him, as far as CBA is concerned, a most slippery catch.

---

[14]see above

[15]When I mentioned to Mrs. Duarte that Benjamin had claimed a connection to "killer" Mario Orejas, she was taken aback. Orejas did exist, she told me, but Benjamin had made up the part about being related to him.

Benjamin himself, it seems, has failed to acknowledge the extent of the mismatch between his own aims and those of CBA. His statements suggest that he believes there is some halfway point, some meeting place in the middle where he and the school can compromise to create a educational experience that will work for him. To me, at least, Benjamin said little to imply that he rejected the *concept* of school, that he challenged the right of adults to demand six or more hours of his time every day both in and out of class. Even if he wanted to become "a Tony Montana," what school offered could be useful, he conceded.

KMG: You don't have to go to school [to become like Tony Montana].

BD: Yeah, but I gotta learn how to -- mess with money a lot, you know?

KMG: You don't have to go to school for that, either.

BD: Yeah, but I wanna -- I wanna be smart, so like, when I'm doing a buy, or something, they won't jerk me -- tell me a million, and let's say they got $199,990[sic]. Ten dollars is a lot of money.

KMG: But you just have to count for that. All you've got to know how to do is count. You know how to count already, yeah?

RG: Yeah.

KMG: So what do you need --

RG: I don't know. I'm just buggin', I don't know...

Benjamin seemed to view school somewhat as a rite of passage, one of the hoops that grownups made you jump through before they let you become one of them. What he didn't appreciate, however, was that CBA made the hoop just a little higher and a little narrower than it absolutely had to be. A "credit" school, he felt, would offer the same credentials as CBA, while making far fewer demands on him.

KMG: Now, I talked to you before. You said that if you don't pass this year, that you would drop out.

BD: Yeah, I would drop out, I know, but -- I dunno, sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't. Right now I can't, because I'm on probation[16]...But once I'm off of that, I can do whatever I want.

KMG: So once you're off probation, you're going to drop out.

BD: Nah, I'll probably stay, but I wanna go to another school. I can't take that portfolio thing, too, man; I'm getting tired of that. I wanna go to a school with credits. Shorter classes.

The creation of any school culture is a complex interlayering of the values and ideals of those within the school community: principal, teachers, students, support personnel; that culture is even shaped in part by people outside of that space: state school policymakers, school district administrators, community institutions, parents (Sarason, 1982). To one degree or another, schools shape, and are shaped by, the people both within and without them.

The question that Benjamin, and students like him, yanks to one's attention is: how are schools shaped by Benjamins? How does a still-developing school respond to the demands of such a student? A school like Central Bronx Academy, one attempting to craft a culture so antithetical to those of the "credit" schools Benjamin idealizes, seems to have little room for children like him. Even CBA's most willing students -- the ones that attend every day, join every activity possible, attend Saturday school regularly -- have a tenuous hold on academic success. It takes all of CBA's will to support students like Sophia, who is an active member of the student council, the Latino Student Association, and leads out in almost every parent- or student-oriented activity her school has to offer -- yet is resource room-classified, and must work closely with Ms. Keye to make sure that she keeps abreast of

[16]About two years before, Benjamin had spent nearly two months in a youthful offenders' facility for his role in assaulting and robbing another boy.

classwork that sometimes overwhelms her. Or students like Matt, who "gets" CBA, understands what it's trying to do, and wants to fly with its program, yet is still struggling to overcome years of underpreparation. As Mr. McFadden sums it up:

> If I expend the energy chasing Benjamin off the street, then am I doing less for other people?...We are going to have a hard enough time getting the kids who do everything that we ask them to do to college. Because what [we should ask them to] do is such a huge issue, and making it rigorous enough is such a huge issue, and given what they've started with is such a huge issue, that just doing that for even the 90% of kids who come to school ready to learn all the time...is such a big issue -- without doing the rest of this, too...right now, I will walk past Martin[17] if I see him in front of the building, and I am walking in to teach my class and I know he's not coming in. I will not even say anything to him...Now, if he comes back to class, I think I've done a good job in setting up the expectations so that he can fit in, and he might not get out of it as much as other people, because he doesn't put very much into it, but he's not going to mess it up for everybody else...Because those other kids -- man, they're trying their hearts out, and they're not passing, because they don't know enough yet. I've got to give them my energy.

Where, indeed, do schools get the "energy" to bring someone like Benjamin -- who, it seems, is trying hard to maintain his distance; to come only so close, and no closer -- into the heart of the school? CBA is clearly a place where knowing a student is part of helping him to be successful. The demands for engagement that it places on its students -- by not permitting them to give birth to, and quickly disown the work they do; by creating time structures that permit deeper-than-average study and investigation of a subject -- reveal that this school is not a place where a student can "hide" and still succeed. This is not to say that the boundaries between one's life inside and outside of school must be trampled down in order to create a truly effective educational experience. Yet CBA clearly recognizes that blurring those lines of delineation makes for what it considers a more powerful form of schooling.

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[17] Martin, like Benjamin, is one of CBA's "fringe" students.

Too powerful, it appears, for Benjamin, who would rather be left alone.

And for now, at least, that is what Central Bronx Academy does. Though they are still searching for ways to bring in their Benjamins (recent staff meetings, in fact, have focused on creating school structures to deal more effectively with children whose behavior jeopardizes their own success, as well as that of other children), for the moment, at least, there is not a great deal that CBA can do for this particular child. As Ms. Keye said to me recently:

> Somebody like Benjamin...I don't know who really would know how to handle certain situations like that. Now what happens is we tend to look away. That's my take on what happens...We don't want to abandon these students, but we also don't want to jeopardize the positive things that are happening for the other students.[18]

[18]Interview with the author, 3.28.98.

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